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The Roman Monster
An Icon of the Papal Antichrist in Reformation Polemics

LAWRENCE P. BUCK

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For Laura, David, and Judy.
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Abbreviations

ADB  Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie
ARG  Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte/Archive for Reformation History
DMA  Dictionary of the Middle Ages
DNB  Dictionary of National Biography
WA   D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimar, 1883–.
WABrD Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel. Weimar, 1930–.
Introduction

The Roman Monster

Historical Context

In December 1495, following several days of heavy rain, the Tiber River flooded the city of Rome for nearly a week resulting in extensive drowning and destruction. When the waters finally receded, a rumor began to circulate that a grotesque monstrosity had been discovered in the muddy detritus. In a message to the Signoria, the Venetian ambassador to Rome mentioned the story, dating it January 1496. This is the earliest documentation of the report of the Roman monster, a tale that would produce one of the most notorious portents of the Reformation era. The creature itself is inherently fascinating, consisting of an eclectic combination of human and animal body parts. The symbolism of these elements, the interpretations that religious controversialists read into them, and the history of the image itself, help to document antipapal polemics from fifteenth-century Rome to the Elizabethan religious settlement.

The report of the monster from the Tiber gave rise to an illustration that was based on popular iconography, interpreted as a divine portent, and appropriated for religious propaganda. The iconographic elements derived from historic and folkloric commonplaces whose meanings were clear to an audience familiar with such visual symbols. The monster as portent derived from the common opinion that God sent anomalies of nature to warn of impending change and to call sinners to repentance. Such unnatural phenomena, however, needed to be interpreted. Religious controversialists of the Reformation readily appropriated the Roman monster as a polemical trope, explaining it in religious attacks and responses during the course of the sixteenth century.

Because so many different groups interpreted the monster for their own purposes, its history illuminates a variety of themes relevant to the course of the Reformation. Its obscure origins among late medieval heretics in Rome, its adoption as an antipapal cartoon in Bohemia, its explication as a symbol of Lutheran opposition to Catholic practices and teachings, its interpretation
as a figure of the papal Antichrist, its representation in wonder-books\(^1\) as a warning of the imminent apocalypse, and its use by Protestant and Catholic polemicists for propagandistic purposes illustrate facets of the Reformation from late medieval heresies to Counter-Reformation conflicts.

It is difficult for the modern mind to grasp the significance that men and women of the sixteenth century placed on monstrosity. The modern world looks at abnormalities and malformations as a medical issue. In contrast, the medieval world viewed monsters as divine prodigies, warnings from God calling sinners to repentance. Rather than emphasizing etiology and treatment, the medieval perspective focused on symbol and meaning, sign and signified.\(^2\) The author of *Histoires prodigieuses* (1560), Pierre Boaistuau, wrote that monstrous prodigies force us “to look into ourselves, strike our consciences as with a hammer, examine our vices, and hold in horror our misdeeds.”\(^3\) To appreciate the persuasive power that monstrosity as a sign had on the minds of sixteenth-century Christians, it is essential to comprehend certain aspects of the premodern worldview.

First, there was a nearly universal belief that mankind was living at the very end of time, that doomsday was absolutely and indisputably imminent. Luther gives voice to this conviction in his model sermon written on the text for the Second Sunday in Advent, Luke 21:25–36.\(^4\) The lection speaks of various signs that foretell that the kingdom of God is at hand (verse 31). Luther repeatedly makes the point that “der jüngste Tag sei nicht ferne” (“doomsday is not far off”). The notion that the world was on the very brink of destruction was part of a broader understanding of historical time. The late medieval Christian understood history in a linear fashion. Time began with the fall and the divine promise of a savior; it proceeded toward the teleological goal of the incarnation, believed to come at the approximate midpoint of Christian history; thereafter it would continue until the final judgment. Not only was historical time seen as a structured, “divinely predetermined totality,” it was also perceived as filled with sin and evil. The apocalyptic vision was very

1. On the genre of wonder-books, see chapter 5 below.
2. For a discussion of changing perspectives on monstrosity, see Park and Daston, “Unnatural Conceptions.”
4. WA, 10.1/2:105; St.L., 11:44–73; WML, 10:59–86.
pessimistic about the present; it held that the coming judgment would see the punishment of evil and the triumph of good.\(^5\)

The late medieval Christian also firmly believed in the reality of the Antichrist, an antithesis to Christ that would appear shortly before Judgment Day. There were competing perspectives regarding this doctrine. Some held that the Antichrist would be a personal, incarnate, historical figure who would influence the course of events. Others saw the Antichrist as a composite or collective phenomenon that would appear as pervasive hypocrisy and sinfulness within Christendom. There were also authors who identified the Antichrist either with a particular pope or with the institution of the papacy and the clerical hierarchy, i.e., the papal Antichrist. Scripture taught that the Antichrist would have numerous precursory minions, also called Antichrists, who would foretell the coming of the \textit{summus Antichristus}.

Another element of the late medieval worldview that relates to the popularity of the Roman monster was the belief that signs and wonders conveyed messages from God. Such portents might take the form of anomalies in the heavens, misshapen animals and humans, or even fantastic monstrosities. Eclipses, odd-shaped clouds, and malformed creatures of all sorts were seen as “preachings” from God that cried out for decoding and interpretation, for they called sinners to repentance and prefigured imminent ecclesiastical and/or secular change. University-trained clergy as well as hedgerow preachers and street singers were eager to offer explanations. For example, Luther’s sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent gives apocalyptic interpretations of lunar and solar eclipses, comets, meteor showers, violent storms, the French pox, and indeed also the Roman monster. When Luther learned of this monstrosity from the Tiber, he almost immediately saw the potential for interpreting it as an antipapal portent, a figure of the papal Antichrist.

A preoccupation with the imminence of the apocalypse, a belief in the indisputable reality of the Antichrist, and a fascination with the message conveyed through portents help explain the late medieval mentality that sought to interpret and find meaning in the monstrosity reportedly found in Rome in January 1496. To understand those efforts this study poses five research questions together with associated corollaries.

First, what was the iconographic significance of the monster and its background setting as shown in the surviving Czech copy of the original Italian

illustration, that is, the reproduction made by Wenzel von Olmütz (fig. 1)? In other words, what message did the monster and its context convey? Who were the likely originators of the illustration, and what relation existed between their ideology and the iconographic meaning of the symbols in von Olmütz’s reproduction?

Second, what was the provenance of the image from Rome in 1496 to Wittenberg in 1523? Related to this question is the issue of how and why an Italian pasquinade came to be copied by a Czech reproduction artist. Finally, how did the Czech copy come to the attention of Philip Melanchthon, who used it to illustrate his pamphlet *The Pope-Ass Explained* (1523)?

Third, what did Philip Melanchthon mean when he called the Roman monster a figure of the papal Antichrist? How had the commonplace of the papal Antichrist developed? How was the papal Antichrist typically described? What meanings had it acquired by the beginning of the sixteenth century?

Fourth, how should one interpret Melanchthon’s very popular *The Pope-Ass Explained*? Scholarly opinion has generally held that this piece of propaganda “did not reflect credit” on its author, that it was not worthy of the great German humanist. Yet, this tract resonated exceedingly well with its audience; it was frequently republished, translated, and imitated. Can a case be made that reconciles the content of this pamphlet with the gravitas of its author?

Finally, in what ways did the Roman monster and Melanchthon’s interpretation of it influence Reformation polemics? Given that scholars have judged this monstrous image one of the most popular of Reformation propaganda, how did it acquire this status? What literary and pictorial artifacts document its popularity and influence?

The study of these questions leads to four conclusions that comprise the thesis of this book. (1) The iconographic images that made up the Roman monster illustration (preserved in the von Olmütz reproduction) derived from well-understood historical, religious, and folkloric commonplaces. Their symbolic meaning coincided with the antipapal ideology of two pre-Reformation heretical movements—the Waldensians and the Bohemian Brethren. This fact explains the transformation of the Italian pasquinade into a Bohemian antipapal illustration.

(2) The papal Antichrist commonplace identified the “abomination of desolation” as the collective sinfulness of the papacy and its unrighteous
clergy. Drawing on ideas from John Wyclif, John Hus, and Jakoubek of Ströbro, writers such as Nicholas of Dresden and the author of *The Anatomy of the Antichrist* elaborated the theme of the papal Antichrist using a monstrous animalized body as a metaphor for the pope as Antichrist. In *The Pope-Ass Explained*, Melanchthon demonstrates knowledge of this topos.

(3) In writing his polemical tract, Melanchthon cleverly brought together three elements: the literary commonplace of an animalized monstrosity used as a metaphor for the papal Antichrist, Lutheran teachings circa 1523, and the physical image of the Roman monster itself. If one places Melanchthon's text in its historical context, it is clear that the points he makes reflect Lutheran criticisms of Catholic doctrine and disputes with the papacy and its defenders from 1517 to 1523. This being the case, his interpretation of the pope-ass could serve as a kind of mnemonic device summarizing the principal Lutheran criticisms of the Roman Church. As a humanist pedagogue, Melanchthon rejected the medieval *ars memorandi* (art of memory images) as a teaching tool. Yet his explication of the image of the pope-ass and Lucas Cranach's accompanying illustration of the monster could serve as just such an aid to memory for summarizing Lutheran teachings.

(4) The Roman monster entered into the discourse of the Reformation not only due to the popularity and persuasiveness of Melanchthon's pamphlet, but also because numerous authors adopted it as a polemical trope and/or an apocalyptic omen. As one of the age's most prolific writers, Luther frequently used the pope-ass together with a lexicon of asininity to ridicule and defame the papacy and the clerical hierarchy. When Melanchthon expanded his original *The Pope-Ass Explained* in 1535, Luther added his own approbation, reaffirming the monster as a divine portent of the papal Antichrist. Melanchthon's pamphlet enjoyed frequent reprints and was translated into French, Dutch, Low German, Latin, and English. It even inspired a French Catholic and an English Protestant to write their own interpretations of the creature's anatomy. In addition, the image of the Roman monster became a standard apocalyptic omen included in the popular genre of wonder-books, especially in Germany and England. In all of these ways, the image of the Roman monster became established as an emblematic metaphor in the rhetoric of the Reformation.

8. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 182, point out the similarity between monstrous figures and art of memory images.
This study is intended both for scholars and general readers interested in early modern Europe. To make the material accessible, the text provides identifying information and dates for individuals who might not be familiar to a general audience. In discussing topics likely to be unfamiliar to the non-specialist, appropriate background information is provided. Quotations of primary sources appear in English, with a citation to a scholarly translation if one exists. Otherwise, all translations are original with this study. Quotations of scripture are from the Douai-Rheims version of the Bible. For the reader who wants to delve more deeply into a given topic, notes provide an introduction to the historical literature.

The recent past has seen many investigations of monstrous portents: Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park’s *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (chap. 5), Dudley Wilson’s *Signs and Portents*, Irene Ewinkel’s *De monstris*, Ottavia Niccoli’s *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, Alan W. Bates’s *Emblematic Monsters*, Julie Crawford’s *Marvelous Protestantism*, Jennifer Spinks’s *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, and Philip M. Soergel’s *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination*, to name just a few excellent studies of this topic. None of these, however, has treated the Roman monster or Philip Melanchthon’s pamphlet in detail. In fact, the only monographic study of this topic is *Der Papstesel* published in 1891 by the German art historian Konrad von Lange. This was a groundbreaking investigation of the symbols in Wenzel von Olmütz’s illustration. However, recent research into the intersection of folklore and iconography has opened up new understandings that have relevance to the theme of asininity. Also, von Lange provided little background on the papal antichrist and he did not delve into the historical context within which Melanchthon wrote his tract.

The appendix provides the first English translation of Melanchthon’s 1523 version of *The Pope-Ass Explained*. As discussed in chapter 5, in 1579 John Brooke translated the pope-ass tract into English using as his source the 1557 French translation of the 1535 German revision. In 1823, Henry Cole (1792–1858), an Anglican cleric of strong Calvinist persuasion, again translated the pope-ass pamphlet, likewise using the 1535 text. Cole rendered a free translation that also included Luther’s 1535 approbation as though it

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9. Lange, *Der Papstesel*.
11. Indicated as A1, this text is in WA, 11:375–79. A modern German version of this text can be found in St.L., 19:1934–38.
were part of Melanchthon's text. The Cole translation is difficult to obtain and cannot be used for scholarly purposes.12

This study reexamines von Lange's treatment of the iconography of the pope-ass image, it offers ideological reasons for associating the image with the Waldensians and Bohemian Brethren, it accounts for the reproduction and survival of the monster's image in sixteenth-century Bohemia, it provides historical background on the topos of the papal Antichrist, it contextualizes Melanchthon's tract within the first five years of the Lutheran movement, and it documents the popularity of the pope-ass within the polemical and apocalyptic writings of the Reformation.

Chapter 1

The Roman Monster of 1496
From Pious Portent to Political Pasquinade

Philip Melanchthon’s 1523 pamphlet known as The Pope-Ass Explained is one of the most famous pieces of propaganda for the early Lutheran Reformation. In it he denounces the papacy by explicating the parts of a portentous monstrosity as symbols of papal corruption and error. Historians have long known that Melanchthon’s monster image was based on a copper engraving that came to Luther’s attention from Bohemia. Although at one time misidentified as an illustration from the workshop of Michael Wogemut, Melanchthon’s source has been definitively attributed to the Moravian goldsmith, copper engraver, and reproduction artist Wenzel von Olmütz.

Far from being a simple picture of a pious portent, the von Olmütz engraving brings together a variety of folkloric and political symbols to express a powerful denunciation of papal claims to secular authority. These symbols, though speaking in symbolic code, clearly represent the ecclesiological ideology of two heretical movements of the late Middle Ages, the Waldensians and the Bohemian Brethren (or Unitas Fratrum).

The only extant version of this political illustration is a reproduction that von Olmütz made from an Italian original (fig. 1). The Roman Waldensians were probably responsible for the first politicized picture of the monster, possibly with the aid of two members of the Unitas Fratrum who visited Rome in 1498. One of these visitors, Luke of Prague, was the leader of a faction of the Unity, the Major Party. At a meeting of the Brethren, the Conference of Chlumec, he had attempted to find common ground with his opponents, members of the Minor Party, by emphasizing the shared opposition of both groups to papal claims for secular jurisdiction, precisely the message of the von Olmütz engraving. Indeed, there is strong circumstantial evidence that the emissaries from the Unity were in fact the ones who carried the original Roman version of the monster north to Bohemia and Moravia. Thus, in crafting his propaganda treatise for Lutheranism, Melanchthon drew on imagery from pre-Reformation popular religious movements.
Figure 1: *Roma caput mundi*, reproduction of Roman monster by Wenzel von Olmütz (1498). Photo by Herbert Boswank, courtesy of Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.
Chapter 1

The Roman Flood, 1495/96

The legend of the Roman monster had its beginnings in the great Roman flood of 1495/96. As the floodwaters receded, a popular eschatological poem reported the flood as a warning sign from God. The disaster also gave rise to one of the most enduring polemical images of the Reformation era. More infamous than the flood itself, this monstrosity played an important role in subsequent portent literature, in religious propaganda, and in the encyclopedic wonder-books of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

During the first week of December 1495, Rome experienced a heavy downpour that lasted for four days. Then, suddenly, the rain stopped. As the sky cleared, the Tiber, famous since antiquity for devastating floods, began to transform into a raging torrent.

Tiber floods were frequent during the late Middle Ages (1422, 1470, 1476, 1495, 1500, 1530, 1552, and 1598). Systematic deforestation that had occurred during the 1300s and 1400s throughout much of Italy greatly exacerbated the situation. Also, construction along the banks of the river caused irregularities in the width of the riverbed, creating bottlenecks for the rushing water. Floating mills moored along the riverbank could break loose in a torrent and get caught on a bridge, thus forming a dam. By the late 1400s flooding had become an urgent problem for Rome as well as for many other parts of Italy.

On Friday, December 4 (St. Barbara’s Day), the waters rose to the point that the bridge to Castel Sant’Angelo became nearly impassible; a group of cardinals who had a meeting in the castle in the morning were barely able to cross the bridge at noon. Large sections of the medieval city were suddenly inundated. Papal prisoners held in the Tor di Nona across the river from the Castel Sant’Angelo drowned in the torrent. The flood continued to rise for five days, finally reaching a high-water point of twenty-four feet above normal.

The flood was especially devastating because it did most of its damage in the low-lying area within the bend of the Tiber, from the Castel Sant’Angelo in the north to the Jewish ghetto in the south and from the river eastward past the Pantheon and Santa Maria sopra Minerva. In that section of the city resided more than 60 percent of the city’s inhabitants. Not surprisingly, those

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Of all the curious, horrifying cast of monstrous characters known to early-modern Europeans, the papal ass was certainly one of the strangest. Word of its “dredging up” from the Tiber River in 1496 traveled a circuitous route through sixteenth-century Europe, helping to make the famous images that Cranach and others fashioned to depict it into readily recognizable pieces of the era’s mental furniture. Lawrence Buck’s dogged attempts to cast light upon the trail that knowledge and exploitation of this event followed reveals a great deal about the ways in which religious, scientific, and preternatural knowledge got around in premodern society.

— PHILIP SOERGEL

This book is a fascinating and meticulous study of antipapal polemics from the early Reformation to the Elizabethan religious settlement. Lawrence Buck skillfully analyzes the iconography of the various images of a grotesque monstrosity that had been discovered after the Tiber River flooded Rome, and traces the uses they were put to by reformers including Philip Melanchthon’s 1523 pamphlet, The Pope-Ass Explained. With abundant illustrations, Buck’s monograph delineates the various elements used to illustrate the monster and its connection to the papal Antichrist. Buck also ties the Roman monster into the discourse of the Reformation including Luther’s use of it, its appearance in wonder-book literature, and its use in polemics as part of the French Wars of Religion and the Elizabethan Reformation. This intriguing book should attract widespread interest from Reformation scholars. It is one of the freshest and most original books to have appeared in several years.

— JONATHAN ZOPHY